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Inhaltsverzeichnis

I. Strukturelle Entwicklung und Steuerung des Hochschulwesens

Ulrich Teichler
Quantitative und strukturelle Entwicklungen des Hochschulwesens 8

Hans Merkens
Zur Wettbewerbsfähigkeit des Hochschulsystems in Deutschland 25

Barbara M. Kehm/Ute Lanzendorf
Ein neues Governance-Regime für die Hochschulen –
mehr Markt und weniger Selbststeuerung? 41

David Phillips
Some Concerns in Higher Education in England: A Personal Note 56

II. Wissenskulturen, Studienreform und Lehre

Dirk Rustemeyer
Universitäre Wissenskulturen 62

Klaus-Peter Horn
Studienreform in der Erziehungswissenschaft –
Zwischen Pluralisierung/Diversifizierung und Zentrierung/Vereinheitlichung 76

Ewald Terhart
Die Lehre in den Zeiten der Modularisierung 87

Bernhard Schmidt/Rudolf Tippelt
Besser Lehren – Neues von der Hochschuldidaktik? 103

III. Erziehungswissenschaft: Berufsübergang und Fächervergleich

Cathleen Grunert/Ivo Züchner/Heinz-Hermann Krüger/Thomas Rauschenbach
Der Preis des Erfolgs? Hauptfach-Pädagogen und -Pädagoginnen im Beruf 116

Thomas Rauschenbach/Rudolf Tippelt/Horst Weishaupt/Ivo Züchner
Erziehungswissenschaft im Fächervergleich 136

IV. Förderung des wissenschaftlichen Nachwuchses

Jürgen Enders
Wissenschaftlicher Nachwuchs in Europa 158

Julia A.M. Delius/Nicola von Hammerstein
International Max Planck Research Schools:
Neue Wege der Graduiertenausbildung 170

V. Evaluation und Ranking

Carmen Lebherz/Cordula Mohr/Matthias Henning/Peter Sedlmeier
Wie brauchbar sind Hochschul-Rankings? Eine empirische Analyse 188

Hildegard Schaeper
Hochschulbildung und Schlüsselkompetenzen –
Der Beitrag der Hochschulforschung zur Evaluation der Qualifizierungs-
funktionen und -leistungen von Hochschulen 209

David Phillips

Some Concerns in Higher Education in England: A Personal Note

When considering British universities in a comparative context – and especially in a context comparing them with German and many other European universities – a range of contrasts becomes evident. Among other distinguishing aspects, British universities

- are self-governing corporations (and own their land and buildings);
- employ both their academic and support staff;
- receive income from student fees and raise extra money through donations and various entrepreneurial activities (as well as through research funding);
- control their own admissions at undergraduate and postgraduate levels;
- determine the syllabuses for the courses they offer;
- set examinations and confer qualifications in their own name;
- operate on a relatively small scale in terms of staff:student ratios, so that classes are not over-full and there is close and regular contact between students and those teaching them.

This initial check-list indicates what might be seen as considerable advantages over situations (not only in Germany) where academics are civil servants, where ministries regulate examination syllabuses and control budgets, where there is an embedded right to a university place if students have an appropriate school-leaving qualification (so that academics do not control admissions and student numbers grow very large), and where generally a university cannot regard itself as an institution independent of the state.

Despite their being ‚self-governing corporations' with their own charters, however, British universities are not financially independent and are increasingly subject to external scrutiny. Firstly, they depend on receiving funding from the state. There is in fact only one financially independent university in the United Kingdom, the University of Buckingham; all the rest – from the ancient foundations of Oxford and Cambridge and the early Scottish universities to the newest of the new universities – rely upon state funding. In England funds from the state were previously channelled through the University Grants Committee (UGC), established in 1919, which acted as a buffer organisation between the government and the universities. Since the 1988 Education Reform Act the UGC has been replaced by different types of funding council, appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. An Act of 1992 introduced a unified higher education sector (incorporating the former polytechnics, now designated universities), and at present English universities come under the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which determines how much income – for teaching and research – each institution receives.

Secondly, universities are subject to quality control. When it was set up, HEFCE had the task of assessing quality in the institutions receiving funds from it; this responsibility passed in 1997 to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an in-

dependent body funded through subscriptions from higher education institutions and through contracts with the principal higher education fund-providing agencies. The QAA undertakes regular audits of teaching and other areas of activity impinging on quality assurance in the higher education sector (admissions processes, syllabuses for degree courses, arrangements for examinations, etc.).

Thirdly, the research activity of universities is assessed on a regular basis. The funding councils are jointly responsible for the regular ‚Research Assessment Exercise' (RAE), which ‚assesses the quality of research in universities and colleges in the UK enabling the higher education funding bodies to distribute public funds for research selectively on the basis of quality'. The next such exercise – the sixth – will take place in 2008 and will ‚provide quality profiles for research across all disciplines'. There will be about seventy ‚units of assessment' with evaluations undertaken by experts in the relevant fields appointed through open competition and nomination by professional bodies. The level of research funding for each ‚unit of assessment' (as opposed to funding for teaching purposes) depends on the outcome of the RAE. In recent exercises each faculty or department has been marked on a seven-point scale, with 5* constituting the highest grade, awarded to units of activity seen to demonstrate outstanding international performance. The criteria have been as follows:

5* Research quality that equates to attainable levels of international excellence in a majority of sub-areas of activity and attainable levels of national excellence in all others.

4 Research quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in virtually all sub-areas of activity, possibly showing some evidence of international excellence, or to international level in some and at least national level in a majority.

3a Research quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in a substantial majority of the sub-areas of activity, or to international level in some and to national level in others together comprising a majority.

3b Research quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in the majority of sub-areas of activity.

2 Research quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in up to half the sub-areas of activity.

1 Research quality that equates to attainable levels of national excellence in none, or virtually none, of the sub-areas of activity.

For the 2008 exercise the categories have been revised as follows:

- Four star: Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
- Three star: Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which nonetheless falls short of the highest standards or excellence.
- Two star: Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
- One star: Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

- Unclassified: Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

The Association of University Teachers (AUT; the main professional organisation representing teachers in higher education) is opposed to the RAE in principle, and the exercise has been subject to considerable criticism and challenge throughout the higher education sector. But it is argued by its supporters that it has resulted in a more focused research effort and higher standards in faculties and departments in most universities. University teachers have had to submit their four ‚best' publications over the period being assessed, and so they are put under significant pressure to publish in refereed journals of international standing. Whatever the feelings about the effects of the exercise, however, it cannot be avoided, and so universities have to plan to achieve the best performance possible.

University departments of education which train teachers are subject too to regular inspection by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Ofsted's reports are made publicly available, as are the outcomes of the RAE and of evaluations made by the QAA, so that ‚league tables' are easily put together and made widely known. In addition, academics are subject to regular internal assessments (which will vary from university to university) through appraisal exercises and through formal student feedback on courses and teaching.

There is then a long-standing climate of more or less continuous evaluation to which academics at British universities have become accustomed since the 1980s. At the same time, however, they still enjoy a degree of independence in the way in which they govern themselves that might appear enviable from the perspective of other countries.

Oxford has performed well in past research assessment exercises. In the 2001 RAE, of the 46 units of assessment in the University twenty-five were scored 5*, seventeen had a score of 5, and only four scored as low as 4. The amount of funding available to each of these units is crucially dependent on these scores, since a financial mechanism known as the ‚research-related allocation quality multiplier' is applied to the research element of the HEFCE funding, These multipliers are x4 for 5* departments, and x3 and x2 for departments rated 5 and 4 respectively. This means that the research funding for a 5* institution is double that of one rated 4. The better you are the more money you receive. Less than 4 effectively indicates failure.

It must be expected of any elite university that it will do well in assessments of its research output. In the case of departments whose rating declines, there will usually be some kind of internal inquiry as to what has gone wrong. While success may be quietly celebrated (even by those who dislike the RAE), failure – although it might only be relative failure – becomes a very serious matter. The seriousness is evident not only internally. RAE results are published and so it is easy for prospective students to discover which are deemed to be the ‚best' departments. And the results do not escape the attention of funding bodies prepared to offer studentships or award research grants.

This means that every university must take the RAE very seriously and plan strategically for its performance in the exercise. Extra internal funding might be found to assist

faculties and departments in danger of underperforming; steps can be taken to attract highly rated academics from other universities to boost the RAE submission; considerable pressure is felt by anyone not able to identify four publications of appropriate quality. Results are awaited with trepidation, and once league tables are published all can see which universities have come out best and which can be deemed to be failing in their research efforts.

Departments which do not achieve high ranking are in danger of being closed. In recent years there have been many closures of science departments (particularly in chemistry and physics); such departments are expensive to run and the leadership teams in some universities argue that they simply cannot afford to run them if the funding falls significantly as the result of a lower RAE score. Towards the end of 2004 the University of Exeter was much in the national news as a result of its decision to close both its chemistry and its music department.

There is a worrying tendency – not unconnected with the need (a) to attract fee-paying students in what is seen (not only in the UK) as a market for higher education and (b) to produce coherent internal research programmes – towards a utilitarian or instrumentalist ethos in higher education. Margaret Thatcher when Prime Minister was recorded as responding to a student who told her he was studying history with the remark ‚what a luxury!' And a recent secretary of state for education, Charles Clarke, famously declared education for its own sake to be ‚a bit dodgy': he was not in favour of the ‚medieval concept of scholars seeking truth.' Research and scholarship appear now to be separated in many people's eyes, ‚research' being seen as something of practical relevance, with identifiable application to problems of various kinds in ‚the real world' and as an eminently quantifiable phenomenon, easily assessable, while ‚scholarship' is regarded as something approaching self-indulgence which does not easily lend itself to evaluation. This is particularly alarming if it results in the true scholar, whose teaching is constantly informed by his scholarship (undertaken essentially for its own sake, and not with publication or applicability intentionally in mind), feeling uncomfortable in the academy. We are in danger of losing what has been one of the traditional strengths of the German university, the Humboldtian concept of the unity of teaching and research (in the sense of scholarship).

The answer to this problem lies in tolerance. Those who control universities ought to adopt a healthy ‚broad church' approach which allows the individual scholar to ‚seek the truth' in idiosyncratic ways which do not always fit the state's image of what research is or the individual university leadership's conception of the role of a university. Universities – like all public bodies – must clearly change and develop, but if they lose sight of the individuality which characterises much scholarly endeavour they will become monolithic ‚one size fits all' institutions which will be of much less value and interest.

In the face of widespread disquiet about government interference in higher education, a powerful group of nineteen leading UK research-intensive universities formed itself in 1994 with the aim ‚to promote the interests of universities in which teaching and learning are undertaken within a culture of research excellence, and to identify and dis-

seminate new thinking and ideas about the organisation and management of such institutions'. The ‚Russell Group' has proved to be effective in its lobbying. Now too several British universities are part of the ‚League of European Research Universities', which is set to be a significant Europe-wide forum for international co-operation between universities and which will also be able to represent the interests of leading institutions in the face of outside pressures.

Occasionally the threat is made that in order to avoid the problems outlined above some universities might, with great reluctance, decide to eschew state funding altogether and become private institutions, so that there would be a state/private divide of the kind that exists in the United States. This does not seem very likely at present, but future funding problems might give the notion of privatisation added impetus. From 2006, universities are going to be allowed to charge undergraduates so-called ‚top-up' fees of up to GBP 3000 (the current standard tuition fee is GBP 1125.) Fees will be allowed to vary between courses and will be payable only after students have completed their degrees and are earning above a certain level of income. These extra fees will alleviate funding problems for universities – though not to the extent that they would wish – but will in turn create difficulties for students, significant numbers of whom already leave higher education with considerable debts as a result of loans taken out to support their studies. Oxford is introducing from 2006-7 a bursary scheme with grants of between GBP 1500 and 4000 per year for students from families with income levels below GBP 33 500. The annual cost of the scheme will be about GBP 5,5 million and all successful applicants to the University will be eligible for support if their family income is below the limit determined.

The devolved powers over education in Scotland and Wales have enabled politicians there not – yet – to introduce top-up fees (in the case of Scotland) and to delay their introduction until 2007 and even then possibly not introduce them (in the case of Wales). English university applicants are anticipated to consider Scottish and Welsh universities in larger numbers for the obvious financial advantages that will result; foreign universities – especially in the USA – will also become more attractive.

Universities are adjusting to the new world of markets, precarious finance, and increasing levels of accountability. Academics are coping with growing amounts of paperwork produced by a more intrusive internal and external bureaucracy. At the same time teaching quality continues to be high, and the essential close contact between academics and students is sustained, sometimes under difficult circumstances. Research output has increased. Everyone is busier. For the future there is hope that there will be more reliance on properly audited self-evaluation and that it will be recognised that a system that has so many inbuilt advantages of the kind listed at the start of this Note should not be jeopardised by a worsening of its funding.

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